

News from Specialist Groups

MAMMALS

AFRICAN ELEPHANTS AND RHINOS

The Group, chaired by Dr David Western, has scored a notable success with its diplomatic and publicity campaign to get the Sudanese Government to control the appalling slaughter by commercial poachers of elephants and rhinos in southern Sudan, described by Kes Hillman in the last SSC Newsletter, page 16.

In response the Sudan Government declared a ban on the export of raw ivory starting on December 30, and the SSC Chairman Gren Lucas, has written a warm letter of congratulation to President Nimeiri, at the same time, however, requesting him to extend the ban to close the carved-ivory loophole. The trick is to make light etchings on the raw ivory which then passes as carved ivory.

In a letter to the press being used in the campaign, Dr Esmond Bradley Martin, Vice-Chairman of the Group, says that since 1976 white rhinos have been virtually exterminated in the area and tens of thousands of elephants killed by indiscriminate poachers armed with automatic weapons. In 1975 Hong Kong, the main market, imported no ivory from Sudan; in 1981 the figure was 140 tonnes. The average tusk weight of the Sudan-exported ivory is 'well below the average tusk weights for African exports'.

Recovery in Uganda Parks

In the Group's Newsletter Iain Douglas-Hamilton reports that both Murchison and Queen Elizabeth National Parks (the old names have been restored) are now experiencing a massive regeneration of woody vegetation as a result of the crash in the elephant populations during Amin's reign. The recovery of the habitat provides ideal conditions for the elephant populations to recover, provided security can be maintained.

Robert Malpas reports on a plan to revive the elephant-training station in Zaire, at Gangala-na-Bodio beside the Garamba National Park. The station was first established in 1899 by King Leopold in what was then the Congo and moved to its present site in 1927. But the latest capture of a wild elephant was in 1957, and only four are left today, all females, including one trained moniteur, the term for older animals used to train the new recruits. Robert Malpas suggests the training centre's potential for tourism if it were developed would be 'enormous'. FAO, he says, is already actively involved.

Markus Borner reports that an aerial survey of about one-third of the enormous Selous Game Reserve in southern Tanzania in 1981 showed that elephant numbers had remained stable since 1976, year of the previous count. But the number of elephant skeletons had increased by about 50%, and the ratio of dead to live animals from 7.8% to 12.3%. The distribution of the skeletons on access paths and near settled areas suggested that the cause was poaching.

Black rhinos appeared to have decreased from about 5000 to about 3000, but the well known difficulty of counting rhinos from the air means the figures have to be treated with caution. However, the 3000 rhinos estimated make this the largest black rhino population in Africa.

Unfortunately access roads being built by Shell into three-quarters of the reserve are making it more accessible to hunters, and the Group has initiated a high-level approach to Shell to secure co-operation in minimising the effects of the work.

ANTELOPES

The disastrous effect on the migrating wildebeest and other antelopes of the veterinary fences erected in Botswana 'to control' foot and mouth disease were described by Dr D.T. Williamson at the Harare meeting of the SSC in April and have been widely publicised by Mark and Delia Owens, who have been working in the Central Kalahari Game Reserve for seven years. Thousands of animals have died unable to get to the vital water supplies, a situation exacerbated by the terrible drought in southern Africa - and also by the pumping of millions of gallons out of Lake Xau and into a reservoir for use by the Orapa diamond mine, owned by a partnership of De Beers and the Botswana Government.

The May Gnusletter points out that whereas in the early 1950s wildebeest numbered 'perhaps two or three million' in the Central Kalahari, together with even greater numbers of other antelopes, today wildebeest plus all the others are now perhaps fewer than 500,000.

Moreover, in southern Africa the three kinds of foot-and-mouth virus can be taken across the fencelines in damp soil on the feet of anything from a fly to an elephant, and different types of the virus can cause separate outbreaks in different areas at the same time irrespective of the fences. The fences were built to separate some wild ungulate herds suspected of carrying the disease from cattle, but the virus has never been found in the Kalahari. Nor has it ever been demonstrated that wild animals actually give the disease to domestic stock. So what is the point of the fences?

The September Gnusletter, edited by Chairman Richard D. Estes, reports the results of several surveys and investigations in Africa. Good news from Benin and Upper Volta is the good status of all antelopes except topi in the Pendjari (River) National Park. From Niger, however, John Newby and John Grettenberger report that even inside the Park W improvements in law enforcement are urgently needed to cope with heavy poaching and illegal grazing; more guards and equipment are required as well as persuasion to get Niger, Benin and Upper Volta to co-operate.

Scimitar oryx, however, probably number under 200 and 'will most probably become extinct in Niger in 3-5 years'. Addax are probably under 1000 and decreasing due to hunting by desert patrols, mining explorers, and tourist/travellers. There is still no protected area for them, but the promised Air and Tenere National Nature Reserve will protect about 250; another reserve is needed in the Termit area.

In the Sudan Chris Hillman has written, and the New York Zoological Society has published, a 143-page Wildlife Information Booklet for the Southern Region's Ministry of Wildlife Conservation covering the region's 26 antelope species - with full descriptions of habitat, status, etc., plus maps and hunting regulations. His reports on five aerial surveys made 1977-82 include one of the Boma National Park (1,750,00 ha) which was estimated to hold 849,000 white-eared kob.

In Zambia Richard Jeffery has formed a small group of experts to help in compiling data on Zambia's antelopes. The June census he and Geoffrey Howard carried out of the Kafue lechwe, continuing the check on the effects on the herd of the Kafue dam, showed that the population had not fallen since the previous count 18 months earlier. They hope to mount a full-time research project on the Kafue lechwe next year.